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From Deterrence to Abhorrence: How the Catholic Church Has Changed Its Mind on Nuclear Weapons

Nuclear weapons constitute one of the greatest current threats to world peace. While the Roman Catholic Church has been unequivocal in its condemnation of their use, Church teaching since the Second World War on possessing nuclear weapons as a deterrent has been less clear-cut. This article will lay out the principles of Just War Theory and demonstrate that the use of nuclear weapons is never morally justified. It will show how the thinking of the Church's Magisterium moved from accepting the possession of nuclear weapons as a deterrent to teaching that the very possession of such weapons is intrinsically immoral. It will conclude with a call for the immediate abandonment of the policy of nuclear deterrence, together with unconditional unilateral nuclear disarmament, as the only moral imperative consistent with divine law.

Keywords: nuclear weapons, deterrence, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, Just War Theory, Catholic social teaching

Introduction

To symbolise the dangers facing humanity in the nuclear age, in 1947 the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* introduced the iconic Doomsday Clock, which was then set at seven minutes to midnight, but now shows just 100 seconds to midnight.¹ The *Bulletin* was founded in December 1945 by former Manhattan Project scientists in the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Their mission was to widen public understanding of the implications of these bombings for humanity.² The Doomsday Clock was created to show

1 See: <https://thebulletin.org/2020/01/press-release-it-is-now-100-seconds-to-midnight/>.

2 The roots of the *Bulletin* lay in various efforts by atomic scientists, including Leo Szilard (1898–1964), who had conceived the nuclear chain reaction in 1933, to warn politicians such as Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman about the immense destructive force of atomic weapons. Szilard drafted a petition addressed to President Truman in July 1945 in an attempt to prevent the USA's use of atomic weapons. The petition was signed by 70 Manhattan Project scientists of the Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago. See: <https://www.atomicheritage.org/key-documents/szilard-petition>; Gest, H. 'The July 1945 Szilard Petition on the Atomic Bomb: Memoir by a Signer in Oak Ridge', 2001, <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/12974>. In the 1950s, the *Bulletin* was also instrumental in establishing the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, annual conferences of scientists

how close to self-destruction we are through atomic as well as other perils.³ According to the *Bulletin*, because there has been little impetus to turn the clock back from midnight, the world is now closer than ever to self-destruction.

It is widely acknowledged that the existence of nuclear weapons presents one of the greatest current threats to world peace.⁴ The detonation of a single nuclear weapon could lead to the deployment of dozens more, unleashing a 'nuclear winter' that could exterminate all life on earth. One millisecond could witness the destruction of everything we have worked for over hundreds of thousands of years. Since these weapons were unleashed with such ferocity and incalculable damage to human life in 1945, the Roman Catholic Church's Magisterium has been outspoken in its condemnation of their use.⁵ However, there has been a clear development in the popes' teaching on this issue. It took several decades for the Magisterium to condemn not just the use but also the very possession of nuclear weapons as immoral. For many years, the Church held that, though regrettable, it was nevertheless morally acceptable for nations to possess nuclear weapons as a 'deterrent'. But during the pontificates of Benedict XVI and Francis, a major shift in Magisterial teaching has taken place: the very possession of nuclear weapons is now condemned as a moral affront to God and to humanity.

This article will argue that, while the principles of Just War Theory rightly permit the taking up of conventional arms against an enemy as a last resort, and also allow war to be waged on the condition that non-combatants are not deliberately targeted, it is clear that the use of nuclear weapons is never morally justified. It will argue that the policy of John Paul II and his predecessors – which held that, though the use of nuclear weapons was forbidden, possession was acceptable as a means of 'deterrent' – was fundamentally flawed and contradictory. It will further argue that the present teaching of the Magisterium, which holds that the very possession of nuclear weapons is intrinsically immoral, is sound and consistent with Just War Theory. Finally, it will argue for the immediate abandonment of the policy of nuclear deterrence, together with unconditional unilateral nuclear disarmament, not as a matter of political

concerned about nuclear proliferation, and, more generally, about the role of science in modern society. As of August 2018, the *Bulletin's* Board of Sponsors boasts 14 Nobel Laureates.

3 It is important to note that the current climate crisis is deemed to be as great a threat as that of nuclear war, and this is reflected in the position of the hands on the Clock.

4 For an analysis of the increasing risk posed by nuclear weapons, see Gilinsky, V. 'Nuclear risks are growing and there's only one real solution', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 10 December 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/12/nuclear-risks-are-growing-and-theres-only-one-real-solution/>. Gilinsky argues that one of the key risk factors is nuclear armed states renewing their arsenals, and augmenting them with so-called 'tactical' nuclear weapons which are more easily deployed. See also the important collection of essays in Steen, B. & Njølstad, O. (eds.) *Nuclear Disarmament: A Critical Assessment*, London: Routledge (2019).

5 The teaching of the 'Magisterium' here refers to the teachings of the popes.

expediency, but as the only moral imperative consistent with divine law.

Pacifism and the 'Just War' tradition

Some scholars have argued that, given that war entails the intentional killing of one's foes, it is intrinsically immoral.⁶ Human life is sacrosanct, and this means that no war, no matter how seemingly 'just' it may appear to be, can render the taking of life morally acceptable. Those who subscribe to such pacifism today often do so because they fear that any future war could easily escalate into a full-blown nuclear conflict. Even those who do not have any a priori objection to war, and believe that armed conflicts can sometimes be justified, refer to themselves as 'nuclear pacifists' – for the simple reason that they hold that war involving nuclear weapons can never be morally justified.

My conviction is that absolute pacifism is profoundly wrong-headed, and that it is possible for war to be justified. However, certain conditions must be satisfied if a country is to have the right to go to war. For a war to be just, it must be a means of achieving a desirable and morally defensible outcome. The desire for a victorious outcome does not, in itself, constitute sufficient grounds for going to war. It must also be possible to specify the good which such a victory will achieve. Identifying the specific wrong which justifies taking up arms thereby identifies the conditions according to which surrender should be accepted.

If war is to be waged, then, it must have a just cause – the *ius ad bellum*. In other words, the combatant must intend to put right a particular wrong. The right to go to war can only be enacted if war is a last resort, once all diplomatic attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement have been exhausted. There must be a reasonable chance of success, and the good to be gained through the armed conflict must outweigh the harm caused. The force used must also be proportionate. Lastly, in order for a war to be just, in addition to having *ius ad bellum*, the combatant must adhere to *ius in bello*: the conflict must be conducted according to the rules of war.⁷

These conditions were developed over many centuries by thinkers such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Hugo Grotius, and have been further refined in our own day.⁸ War can be justified only if it is limited. In particular, one

6 See Ruse, M. *The Problem of War: Darwinism, Christianity, and Their Battle to Understand Human Conflict*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2019), pp. 98-102; and Stanley Hauerwas's *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic (2011).

7 Biggar, N. *In Defence of War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2014), pp. 22-36.

8 See O'Donovan, O. *The Just War Revisited*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2003). The work of Augustine of Hippo served as the foundation of the 'Just War' tradition, which has had an enormous impact upon moral philosophical reflections on military matters in the West. For an in-depth study which identifies the fundamental Augustinian premises and as-

condition that is fundamental to the Just War tradition is that the deliberate killing of innocent civilians is never justified. The intentional slaughter of non-combatants or the destruction of entire cities is totally ruled out – either as an end in itself or as a means to military victory.

Some have argued that, as the principles of Just War Theory were formulated during the medieval period, they are no longer applicable to modern warfare. The Second World War provides a clear counter-example to this argument. There was clearly a just cause when, in 1939, the Allied powers declared war on Germany in response to that country's invasion of Poland. The intention was to defeat an intrinsically malevolent and aggressive power. As the war progressed, however, the Allies pursued a deliberate policy of targeting innocent civilians, thus violating the prohibition on the indiscriminate slaughter of non-combatants. The carpet incendiary bombing of population centres such as Dresden and Hamburg, and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were both 'justified' on the ground that such attacks were the most expedient means by which an Allied victory could be secured.

Just War thinking underpins Roman Catholic moral theology on the issue of war and peace. One of the fundamental premises of such theology is that the intentional murder of the innocent is absolutely prohibited by divine law. Indeed, as the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe points out, the vigorous and frequently repeated teaching of the Judaeo-Christian tradition since its inception has been that 'No man may be punished except for his own crime, and those "whose feet are swift to shed innocent blood" are always represented as God's enemies.'⁹ So, if the murder of the innocent is wrong per se, then the mass murder of the innocent (genocide) is wrong a fortiori. This means that, irrespective of the number of 'good' consequences which may have resulted from it, the slaughter of civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was intrinsically immoral. Thus, for Anscombe, the first question we must ask before considering any action is: will this action violate an absolute divine prohibition? If our answer is 'yes', then the action is wrong no matter how much 'good' may result from it, and no matter how much harm it may prevent. Only if our answer is 'no' can we proceed to weigh up the extent to which the action will do more good than harm.¹⁰

sesses them in the light of historical, Neoplatonic and Christian contexts, see Mattox, J.M. *Saint Augustine and the Theory of Just War*, London: Continuum (2008). Mattox's book also explores the effect of the Augustinian legacy upon medieval and modern philosophical thinking on the nature of warfare and on how war might be waged justly and morally. See Tooze, J.D. *The Just War in Aquinas and Grotius*, London: SPCK (1965), for a scholarly and exhaustive appraisal of the ideas of Aquinas and Grotius concerning Just War Theory.

9 Anscombe, G.E.M. 'War and Murder', in Anscombe, G.E.M. et al. (eds.) *Nuclear Weapons: A Catholic Response*, New York: Sheed and Ward (1961), pp. 55-57.

10 *ibid.* When, in 1956, it was proposed that former US President Harry S. Truman should be given an honorary Oxford degree, Elizabeth Anscombe protested, and the eventual result was a classic of 20th-century Just War Theory: 'Mr. Truman's Degree'. Anscombe's stance was

What do the principles of Just War Theory have to say about the present defensive policy of the West? It is argued that the weapons of the NATO powers, both nuclear and conventional, are designed for defence against potential aggression, especially from so-called 'rogue states', such as North Korea and Iran. Similarly, the United Nations upholds the right of a nation to defend itself against military aggression.

Clearly, therefore, if a country were attacked by a hostile power, it would have legitimate grounds for war. However, would it be acceptable to deploy nuclear weapons in such a conflict? There is no doubt that the dropping of the first nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki directly contravened Just War principles. The non-combatants of both cities were deliberately targeted, in the hope that the devastating loss of life would compel Japan's leadership to surrender. While it is clear that civilians had already been targeted in air raids on population centres in Germany using conventional means, what was distinctive about the deployment of nuclear weapons was their unique capacity to annihilate entire populations and cause harm to their descendants through the uniquely harmful effects of radiation.¹¹ It is hard to imagine any use of nuclear weapons which would not entail the wholesale obliteration of civilian populations. Since the deployment of such weapons would be totally indiscriminate, and would lack proportionality, it would necessarily entail the slaughter of the innocent, and *ipso facto* this would be morally illicit.¹²

However, at least since the 1950s, many leaders of Western nations have

unequivocal: 'For me to choose to kill the innocent as a means to their ends is always murder, and murder is one of the worst of human actions. So the prohibition on deliberately killing prisoners of war or the civilian population is not like the Queensberry Rules: its force does not depend on its promulgation as part of positive law, written down, agreed upon, and adhered to by the parties concerned. When I say that to choose to kill the innocent as a means to one's ends is murder, I am saying what would generally be accepted as correct. But I shall be asked for my definition of "the innocent". I will give it, but later. Here, it is not necessary; for with Hiroshima and Nagasaki we are not confronted with a borderline case. In the bombing of these cities it was certainly decided to kill the innocent as a means to an end.' See Anscombe, G.E.M. 'Mr Truman's Degree', in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, Vol. III: *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford: Blackwell (1981), pp. 62-71 (p. 64).

11 See Ronald Knox's excellent study of the use of the atomic bomb, and the philosophical and ethical questions arising therefrom, in *God and the Atom*, London: Sheed & Ward (1945). See also Thomas Merton's highly prescient essays collected in Burton, P.A. (ed.) *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books (2004); and Cochran, D.C. *Catholic Realism and the Abolition of War*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books (2014). For a more explicitly theological exploration of these issues, see Garrison, J. *The Darkness of God: Theology After Hiroshima*, London: SCM Press (1982).

12 For a penetrating discussion of the (im)morality of the allied bombing of civilian targets during the course of the Second World War, see Grayling, A.C. *Among the Dead Cities: Is the Targeting of Civilians in War Ever Justified?*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing (2006). See also Russell, B. *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd (1959).

claimed the right, and frequently declared their intention, to use their nuclear arsenal to obliterate the civilian populations of their enemies as a 'last resort'. President John F. Kennedy, for instance, threatened to launch a 'full retaliatory strike' against the Soviet Union at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. A fundamental feature of American defensive strategy since that time has been the ultimate existential threat of eliminating huge swathes of an enemy's population.

The immorality of deploying nuclear weapons

While many leaders of nations have pursued a policy of 'last resort' vis-à-vis a nuclear attack on civilians, an increasingly vocal number of philosophers, ethicists and theologians have argued that it is impossible to morally justify the use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances. *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council's document dealing with the Roman Catholic Church's relationship with the modern world, declared that: 'Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and humanity itself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.'¹³ The document also refers to the 'horror and perversity' of 'scientific weapons', declaring that the indiscriminate nature of such weapons makes their deployment morally objectionable – even in cases of self-defence.

This position has been rigorously upheld by all the popes of the nuclear era – including Pius XII,¹⁴ John XXIII,¹⁵ Paul VI¹⁶ and John Paul II. The last was

13 Flannery, A. *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, New York: Costello Publishing Company (1965), pp. 31-317.

14 In his Christmas message for 1955, Pope Pius XII called for a ban on nuclear testing, citing the devastating consequences of nuclear fallout. Pius XII, 'Christmas Message', 24 December 1955, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1955/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19551224_cuore-aperto.html. He declared that the international community must work towards reducing armaments in general and should strive tirelessly for the promotion of peace. He was uncompromising in his condemnation of what he called 'ABC warfare (atomic, bacteriological, chemical warfare)'. The deployment of such weapons could never be morally justified, even in cases of self-defence – and even when all peaceful means of resolving a conflict had been tried and failed. Pius XII, 'Address to VIII Congress of the World Medical Association', 30 September 1954, https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/speeches/1954/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19540930_viii-assemblea-medica.html.

15 John XXIII, in *Pacem in Terris*, was emphatic that all international agencies must strive earnestly to rid the world of nuclear weapons. He echoed his predecessor's plea that a third world war must be avoided at all costs (John XXIII 1963, no 119). To this end, nuclear weapons should be banned. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, London: CTS Publications (1963).

16 In 1965, Paul VI made an apostolic visit to the United States, and was invited to address the UN General Assembly in New York. Speaking to an assembly that was increasingly divided along Cold War lines, he condemned nuclear weapons as part of his overall opposition to war, and

emphatic that the deployment of nuclear arms would be a grave sin against both God and humanity. On a visit to Hiroshima early on in his pontificate (1981), he spoke of the existential threat which nuclear weapons posed to humanity. Nothing less than a moral conversion was required if the human race was to avoid Armageddon: "The future of this planet, exposed as it is to nuclear annihilation, depends on one single factor: humanity must make a moral volte-face."¹⁷

Four years later, on the fortieth anniversary of the dropping of the nuclear weapon on Hiroshima, John Paul II addressed the people of Japan in a radio broadcast:

To speak of Hiroshima and of Nagasaki is to become vividly aware of the immense pain and horror and death that human beings are capable of inflicting upon one another. But it is also to be conscious of the fact that such a tragic destiny is not inevitable. It can and must be avoided. Our world needs to regain confidence in its capacity to choose moral good over evil.¹⁸

At a time when the Cold War still seemed incapable of resolution, he stated that the 'nuclear terror that haunts our time' meant that disputes between nations could only be settled through dialogue that established justice and peace rather than recourse to arms.¹⁹

It is not only irenic ecclesiastics who believe that it is immoral to intend, as a matter of strategic policy, the destruction of whole populations. In 1981, the United Nations' General Assembly made it clear that any nation which first

called on world governments to strive to end the scourge of all weapons of mass destruction. Paul VI, 'Address to the UN General Assembly', 4 October 1965, https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651004_united-nations.html.

17 John Paul II, 'Address to Scientists and Representatives of the United Nations University at Hiroshima', 25 February 1981, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810225_giappone-hiroshima-scientiati-univ.html. See also Hollenbach, D. 'Nuclear weapons and nuclear war: the shape of the Catholic debate', *Theological Studies* (1982) 43(4), 577-605.

18 John Paul II, 'Radio Message to the People of Japan', 6 August 1985, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850806_radiomessaggio-giappone.html.

19 While John Paul II was undoubtedly deeply committed to peace and justice, it would be true to say that his contribution to the nuclear debate was far from consistent. Indeed, as scholars such as Christopher Hrynkow have convincingly argued, the pope's 'entry into the intricacies of achieving nuclear disarmament in a world already negatively marked by nuclear weapons sometimes resulted in accommodations with the status quo'. Hrynkow, C. "'Nothing but a false sense of security": mapping and critically assessing Papal support for a world free from nuclear weapons', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* (2019) 2, 51-81. Moreover, it is perhaps understandable that John Paul II defended the policy of deterrence given that the geopolitical landscape was dominated by the Cold War. His tacit support for NATO also doubtless influenced his thinking, as did his own Polish background and fear of Communist hegemony.

used nuclear weapons would be guilty of ‘the gravest crime against humanity’. Such an act could never be morally justified. The first use of nuclear arms on non-combatants is thus considered by many to be an intrinsically evil act. But can other uses be similarly condemned?

An attack in retaliation on a city is just as immoral as the first use of nuclear weapons, since both involve the slaughter of the innocent. A massive retaliatory strike would, quite simply, be murder – because it would involve the killing of the innocent. Any act which can clearly be categorised as murder is morally unacceptable, and must therefore be excluded a priori. This deontological position is in opposition to those ethicists and policy-makers who defend consequentialist ways of thinking. When deciding upon the morality of a particular action, such thinkers would ask how much good it would be likely to produce, and how much evil it would be likely to avoid. While there are many situations in human life when actions should indeed be decided on the basis of the likely consequences, there are certain acts, such as murder, which must be forbidden, and must not be subject to instrumentalist forms of reasoning where ‘the end justifies the means’. For, as Anthony Kenny puts it:

We know that certain means are evil much more clearly than we know that certain ends are good, and when we do evil that good may come, we are more certain of the evil we do than the good we hope for. If we are told that a certain policy or course of action involves genocide, or murder, or torture, or enslavement, we should not ask: ‘And what good will it do?’ We should have nothing further to do with it.²⁰

It is impossible to hold that the use of nuclear weapons can ever be morally legitimate because, as many politicians have themselves conceded, there can be no ‘victory’ in a nuclear war. Therefore, many would share the view of the popes from Pius XII to John Paul II that there are no circumstances in which the fighting of a nuclear war could be justified.

The strategy of deterrence: Mutually Assured Destruction

It is at this juncture that the ethical debate becomes more problematic. Some argue that, given that there are no circumstances in which the use of nuclear weapons is ever legitimate, we should dispose of them. Others contend that, as the possession of nuclear weapons is the only sure way of safeguarding ourselves against a nuclear war, we should retain and upgrade them. They claim that, while international tensions may have increased, the strategy of deterrence has succeeded in preventing a nuclear war because both sides recognise that it would be insane for either of them to initiate an attack which would inevitably lead to the death of all concerned.

²⁰ Kenny, A. *The Logic of Deterrence*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1985), p. 23.

Since the 1960s, while expressing reservations over this policy, successive US administrations have pursued a strategy of 'Mutually Assured Destruction' (MAD). They have argued that, for all its apocalyptic risks, this strategy acknowledges that there can be no winners in a nuclear conflict, and that 'deterrence' is the only reason for possessing nuclear weapons. According to this argument, the threat of mutual annihilation – the most probable outcome, given the comprehensive and indiscriminate nature of nuclear war – is said to be the 'best' guarantor of the non-use of nuclear weapons.

Given that the use of nuclear weapons on civilian populations is morally wrong, it follows that any regime which possesses them as a deterrent can only do so legitimately if it never intends to use them. However, as Anthony Kenny convincingly argues, 'If that is how the strategy of deterrence is enunciated, there seems a paradox at its core':

If A tries to deter B from something by threatening to launch a nuclear attack on B, A is threatening to do something which on A's own account it would be madness for him to do. If B thinks that A means what he says, B must think that A is mad; if B thinks A does not mean what he says, then B must think that A is bluffing. Either way, then, B must think that A is either mad or lying, so how is A's threat supposed to provide a reason for B to act or to desist from action?²¹

John Paul II's support for nuclear deterrence

There are those, however, who, while defending the proposition that the use of nuclear weapons on non-combatants is intrinsically immoral, nonetheless hold that it is acceptable to possess such weapons as a deterrent. Given the various popes' unequivocal opposition to the evil nature, and use, of nuclear weapons, it may seem surprising that this was the policy recommended by John Paul II and his predecessors. Indeed, in his statement to the UN special session in 1982, John Paul II said: 'In current conditions, "deterrence" based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself, but as a step on the way towards a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable.'²²

In fact, all the popes from 1945 until John Paul II supported 'deterrence' to a lesser or greater degree. This is surely an odd position to take. To forbid all use and yet, at the same time, to accept the legitimacy of deterrence, appears to be a contradiction. Indeed, many Catholic thinkers at the time realised this, and were rightly sceptical about the claim that, if the use of nuclear weapons is

21 *ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

22 John Paul II, 'Message to the UN General Assembly', 7 June 1982, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1982/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19820607_disarmo-onu.html.

wrong, then deterrence is still acceptable. They were appalled by the failure of the papacy to take a clear moral stand and condemn the policy of deterrence. Nonetheless, they seized the initiative and, from quite early on, pointed out the inconsistency and contradictory position on the part of the papacy. In many respects, their work laid the intellectual and moral groundwork for a shift in the Magisterial position that began with Benedict XVI and was fully developed by Francis.

R.A. Markus examines whether the kind of position vis-à-vis deterrence represented by John Paul II is inherently self-contradictory. He asks: how logically coherent or ethically sound is it for a nuclear deterrent to be operated by people who are convinced that nuclear weapons must never be used?²³

It could be argued that this type of deterrence strategy is sound because it upholds the principles of non-combatant immunity and proportionality. The purpose of deterrence is to influence the policy decisions of a potential enemy. If an enemy fails to be deterred, then the deterrent has not succeeded in its desire aim. It does not follow, however, that one is obliged to use nuclear weapons under such circumstances. It is therefore possible to possess nuclear weapons without ever intending to use them.

However, Markus persuasively shows that the chief problem with a deterrence strategy of this kind is that, if a country gives its adversaries advance warning that it is only 'bluffing', then it is highly unlikely that the strategy will be effective. Most of those who advocate deterrence believe that, in order for it to be effective, the possession of nuclear weapons must be backed up with a clear threat to use them if it proves absolutely necessary. Furthermore, this can lead to a position whereby the proponents of deterrence are asking us to find it acceptable to threaten to use nuclear weapons but to condemn actual use of nuclear weapons. How sound is this approach?

According to Markus, the threat of using nuclear weapons is never morally admissible: if it is made without sincerity it entails deception; and if it is made with sincerity it entails being prepared to commit an evil act. Few would dispute the claim that, if it is wrong to commit a specific act, then it is wrong to intend to do that same act. This point is well expressed by John Finnis, Joseph Boyle and Germain Grisez, in their book *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality, and Realism*:

Intentions formed in the heart can be seriously wrong even if they are never carried out. Thus the principle: *one may not intend what one may not do*. Those who intend to perform wrongful acts and are prevented from doing so by circumstances beyond their control are considered blameworthy, like those who succeed in doing similar wrongful acts. The forming of an inten-

23 Markus, R.A. 'Conscience and Deterrent', in Anscombe et al *op. cit.*, (9), pp. 71-78.

tion to perform an act is often considered the beginning of the act itself; the intention is seen as part of the action, with the same moral quality as the whole.²⁴

They insist that it is simply not possible to argue that the intention to engage in nuclear warfare is less morally reprehensible than the action itself.

There are some scholars, however, who have attempted to argue that, while the intention to launch nuclear weapons without due provocation is wrong, there are certain circumstances – such as a country responding to an attack on itself – in which the intention to launch the missiles would be acceptable. However, this does nothing to vitiate the argument above. For, if an act is intrinsically wrong, then it is wrong irrespective of the circumstances; and if, as Finnis, Boyle and Grisez argue, it is true that ‘the intention has the same moral quality’ as the act, then it follows that the intention to commit the act is equally wrong.

A few scholars have remained unpersuaded by this objection, and persist in arguing that the ‘intention’ that lies at the heart of a deterrence policy is not unethical. Clifford Longley, for example, offered the following scenario in 1983:

Let us suppose that I intend to do some immoral action only in certain definite circumstances. Suppose I also believe that only by having this intention can I be sure that those circumstances will never occur; and suppose that it is my moral duty to try to prevent those circumstances from occurring; the situation then is that only by intending to do an immoral act can I do my duty of preventing those circumstances from occurring. Is it now clear that that intention is an immoral one?²⁵

Longley thus claimed that the arguments of those who object to the strategy of deterrence were clearly erroneous. However, this elicited a response from the Rt Rev Christopher Butler, who argued that there was a logical fallacy in Longley’s scenario, because:

It is impossible to intend to respond to a situation which you are certain will never arise. No one can intend to do what he knows he will never have occasion to do. Hence, if deterrence were certain to succeed permanently, it could continue as a policy, though there would be no intention of translating it into act. Unfortunately, such certainty, as is generally admitted, is not attainable.²⁶

Butler’s response clearly exposes the fatal flaw in the arguments of those, such as John Paul II, who claim that it is ethically right to intend to commit an

24 Finnis, J., Boyle, J. & Grisez, G. *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality, and Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1989), pp. 79-80.

25 Longley, C. ‘The Strategy of Deterrence’, *The Times*, 7 February 1983.

26 Butler, B.C. Letter to *The Times*, 9 February 1983.

act which they have openly acknowledged is ethically wrong. Yet this contradictory position remained the settled teaching of the Church until 2006, when a key shift in papal position, precipitated by Benedict XVI, took place.²⁷

The shift in papal policy

While it is often assumed that Pope Francis was the first pontiff to condemn the possession of nuclear weapons, the crucial move was made by Benedict XVI, who declared that the very holding of nuclear arms was deeply problematic. In his World Day of Peace Message for 2006, he made it clear that any policy based upon the acquisition and holding of nuclear weapons was morally untenable. He chided the world's political leaders in the post-Cold War period for failing to deliver on the promise of a more secure and peaceful international order. He argued that, far from decreasing the level of anxiety, the post-1989 era had in some ways seen even greater threats to peace: continued proliferation of nuclear armaments, the danger of terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons, and the highly disturbing fact of unaccounted-for nuclear warheads.

Benedict attacked the whole logic of deterrence:

What can be said, too, about those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries? Along with countless persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims. The truth of peace requires that all ... agree to change their course by clear and firm decisions, and strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament.²⁸

Under Benedict's pontificate, the Magisterium therefore went further than ever in problematising the possession of nuclear weapons. However, it was left to his successor to give unequivocal moral and pastoral expression to this teaching.

From the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has been clear that, even if nuclear weapons do not result in the end of the world, they represent what he calls a 'terminal culture'.²⁹ They therefore need to be eliminated from the

27 For a discussion of the recent shift in the Catholic Church's position on war and nuclear weapons, see Beck, A. 'How Catholic teaching about war has changed: the issues in view', *New Blackfriars* (2015) 96(1062), 130-146.

28 Benedict XVI, 'In Truth, Peace', World Day of Peace Message, 8 December 2006, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20051213_XXXIX-world-day-peace.html, para. 13.

29 Francis, 'Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace', World Day of Peace Message, 8 December 2016, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html.

global scene – and nothing short of a complete ban, such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), agreed by the UN’s General Assembly on 7 July 2017, will suffice. The Holy See was one of the first countries to sign this international treaty, which will make the possession of nuclear weapons illegal.³⁰

In his first World Day of Peace Message, in 2016, Francis categorically condemned the logic of deterrence: ‘An ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence between individuals and among peoples cannot be based on the logic of fear, violence and closed-mindedness, but on responsibility, respect and sincere dialogue. Hence, I plead for disarmament and for the prohibition and abolition of nuclear weapons: nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutual assured destruction are incapable of grounding such an ethics.’³¹ The following year, at an international symposium on ‘Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament’ held in the Vatican on 10 November 2017, Francis took a decisive stand against nuclear weapons, denouncing the very possession of such weapons as immoral.³² This message was reinforced when he addressed those gathered in Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 24 November

30 Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican’s foreign minister, signed the TPNW on behalf of the Holy See in September 2017. In October 2020, an important threshold was reached when the 50th country ratified the TPNW, which came into force on 22 January 2021. See Keown, J. ‘Why M.A.D. is a moral evil’, *The Tablet*, 31 October 2020. See also Kulska, J.D. ‘Towards “Global Zero”: The Role of the Holy See in the Campaign on Nuclear Disarmament’, *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, sectio K – Politologia* (2018) 25(2), 67-80, which focuses on the historical significance of the signing of the TPNW, and the contribution of both the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) – recognised through the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 – and Pope Francis to the advancement of this cause. For a careful consideration of the international ramifications of the TPNW, see Sauer, T. & Reveraert, M. ‘The potential stigmatizing effect of the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons’, *Nonproliferation Review* (2018) 25(5-6), 437-455.

31 Francis *op. cit.*, (29), ‘Nonviolence’, para. 5. See also Tomasi, S.M. *The Vatican in the Family of Nations: Diplomatic Actions of the Holy See at the UN and Other International Organizations in Geneva*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2017), pp. 465, 839-840.

32 For a comprehensive overview and analysis of the 2017 Vatican symposium, see Christiansen, D. & Sargent, C. (eds.) *A World Free from Nuclear Weapons: The Vatican Conference on Disarmament*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press (2020). This splendid volume presents Pope Francis’s address at the symposium, as well as original testimony from Nobel Peace Prize laureates and diplomats, and from a Nagasaki hibakusha (a person affected by the bomb). It also makes a powerful moral case against possessing, manufacturing, and deploying nuclear arms. Tobias Winright (Saint Louis University), who was present at this symposium, has also argued persuasively in support of Francis’s position in ‘What do Pope Francis’ statements on nuclear weapons mean for Catholics in the military?’, *Sojourners*, 15 November 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/what-do-pope-francis-statements-nuclear-weapons-mean-catholics-military>; and in ‘What are the implications of the “very possession” of nuclear weapons being “firmly condemned”?’, 31 December 2017, <https://catholicethics.com/forum/what-are-the-implications-of-the-very-possession-of-nuclear-weapons-being-firmly-condemned/>.

2019.³³ And, in his latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, which he signed at the tomb of St Francis in Assisi on 3 October 2020, Francis reiterated that the elimination of nuclear weapons was a moral and humanitarian imperative.³⁴

Nuclear disarmament and its dangers

If our strategies of deterrence are grounded on a clear preparedness to slaughter the innocent, as Francis rightly recognises, then it is impossible for us to continue to defend them.³⁵ However, those who urge us to consider another way forward must demonstrate that they are fully aware of the risks involved in pursuing a different strategy. After all, many have strenuously argued that any weakening of the deterrent policy may well increase, rather than lessen, the risk of war.

According to ‘realists’ writing in the 1960s–1980s, such as the Protestant theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Ramsey,³⁶ as well as their Catholic contemporaries John Courtney Murray SJ and William V. O’Brien,³⁷ unilateral

33 Magliano, T. ‘US viewpoint: Pope Francis condemns nuclear weapons, so why the silence?’, *Independent Catholic News*, 6 December 2019, <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/38471>. Most dramatically of all, speaking in Hiroshima, Francis declared that ‘the use of atomic energy for purposes of war is today, more than ever, a crime not only against the dignity of human beings but against any possible future for our common home’ and that the ‘use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral’: see Francis, ‘Address of the Holy Father, Peace Memorial (Hiroshima)’, 24 November 2019, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20191124_messaggio-incontropace-hiroshima.html.

34 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, 2020, paras. 258, 262, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. See also Keown, J *op. cit.*, (30).

35 See Fahey, J.J. ‘Catholic conscience and nuclear weapons’, *Journal of Social Encounters* (2020) 4(2), 42–49, which places Pope Francis’s work in the context of Catholic social teaching. See also Christiansen, D. ‘The church says “No” to nuclear weapons: pastoral and moral implications’, *La Civiltà Cattolica* (2018) English edition 2(5), 16–29; and Davenport, K. ‘Pope condemns having nuclear weapons’, *Arms Control Today* (2017) 47(10), 26–27.

36 See Williams, R.E. ‘Christian realism and “the bomb”’: Reinhold Niebuhr on the dilemmas of the nuclear age’, *Journal of Church and State* (1986) 28(2), 289–304. Niebuhr’s analysis was deeply rooted in the theological anthropology of Augustine and John Calvin. His belief in the reality of original sin, and his dismissal of what he perceived as the illusion of human ‘perfectability’, powerfully informed his conviction that the United States’ nuclear deterrent was essential in the face of the threat of aggression from the Soviet Union. The Berlin crisis of 1961 did much to reinforce Niebuhr’s view. See also Niebuhr, R. ‘Moral Man and Immoral Society’, in *Major Works on Religion and Politics*, New York: Library of America (2015), pp. 135–350 (first published 1932). For Ramsey’s views, see Ramsey, P. *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press (1961).

37 The American Jesuit priest and theologian John Courtney Murray (1904–1967), was one of the best-known and most influential *periti* at the Second Vatican Council. He was also an inveterate Cold warrior, who argued that, while ‘an unlimited use of nuclear force is immoral’,

nuclear disarmament constitutes a far greater risk than continuing to possess such weapons. They argue that wholesale nuclear war is a greater evil than domination by a hostile power. However, they also argue that unilateral disarmament would present a far greater risk of such domination because of the sheer magnitude, and urgent nature, of the threat that Western democracies face from malevolent regimes.

It is, nevertheless, highly improbable that even the most malevolent of regimes would launch a nuclear strike entirely gratuitously. They are much more likely to do so in retaliation, or because they deem it advantageous either politically or militarily. It would be possible to prevent the first by ruling out first use of nuclear weapons. And the second could be prevented, in the last resort, by conceding to the enemy's political or military goals before they attack. The humiliation this would cause would be almost unbearable for some. However, no matter how humiliating they may be, retreat or surrender *are* possible courses of action. They are not excluded a priori by any principles of morality or logic. It is indeed fortunate that, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the world came to the brink of nuclear annihilation, the Soviet Union chose humiliating retreat.

Thus, the act of disarming does not increase the risk of nuclear war or of nuclear attack. The first is rendered impossible if we disarm; and we can prevent the second, if need be, by surrendering. The greatest potential threat comes from being compelled to surrender because our enemies have threatened to launch a nuclear attack on us. It is the danger of surrender, versus the risks posed by our current strategies of possession and deterrence, that we must consider carefully. To this extent, the 'realists' are correct.

What conclusions, then, should we draw from this? If the thesis advanced heretofore in this article is valid, then we have no alternative but to abandon our deterrence strategy for the simple reason that it is fundamentally immoral. While some may tremble at the prospect of wholesale unilateral nuclear disarmament by the NATO powers, others have rightly argued that nuclear weapons are so morally reprehensible that they must be unconditionally disbanded with immediate effect. We should unilaterally disarm, then, not because it is politically prudent to do so, but because we are morally obliged to do so. We may well face the danger of being forced to surrender if threatened with a nuclear attack. But that, quite simply, is the burden we must bear if we are to do the right thing. We must remain faithful to God's commands, and trust in the goodness of His providence.

'the facts assert that nevertheless the use of nuclear force remains possible and may prove to be necessary, lest a free field be granted to brutal violence and lack of conscience'. See Murray, J.C. 'Morality and modern war' in Clancy, W. (ed.) *The Moral Dilemma of Nuclear Weapons*, New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs (1961), p. 14. William V. O'Brien argued along similar lines in, e.g., *The Conduct of Just and Limited War*, New York: Praeger Publishers (1981).

Conclusion

As we have seen, while the principles of Just War Theory permit the taking up of conventional arms against an enemy as a last resort, and also allow war to be waged on the condition that non-combatants are not deliberately targeted, it is clear that the use of nuclear weapons is never morally justified. I have shown that the policy of John Paul II and his predecessors – that, though the use of nuclear weapons is forbidden, possession is acceptable as a means of ‘deterrent’ – was fundamentally flawed and contradictory. I have also shown that a significant shift in Roman Catholic teaching occurred under the pontificates of Benedict XVI and Francis, and have argued that the present teaching of the Magisterium, which holds that the very possession of nuclear weapons is intrinsically immoral, is sound and consistent with Just War Theory. The immediate abandonment of the policy of nuclear deterrence, together with unconditional unilateral nuclear disarmament, is called for, not as a matter of political expediency, but as the only moral imperative consistent with divine law.

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